

--- SECOND TALK ---

Paul. Kane.

Hume Savago.

(2) Lecture

-1-

Last week we saw how we are all affected by our surroundings; that our interest in the landscape traces back to John Constable, who founded the School of Landscape Painting, in England, just 100 years ago; and that our country has something very fine to offer us in design and colour.

Let us come to Canada then in 1818, to the early struggling settlement of York, which later became Toronto. There we find a boy, PAUL KANE, who was to become a pioneer in Canadian Art, and a writer of basic Canadian literature. He was born in 1810 and the family migrated to Upper Canada when Paul was 8 years old.

Amid the rigors of those long winters at York, you can imagine the newcomers huddled around the fire, on the cold nights, listening to long tales about the Indians.

The one member of the family group who must have listened spell-bound, was small Paul, a boy of ten years. Probably he never tired of hearing how the Redmen fell upon the unsuspecting villagers, carried off their trophies, and slipped back into the dark security of the forest, their scarlet blankets and feathered head-dresses waving in the breeze. And many a night little Paul must have crept off to his bed with terror in his heart.

The days came and went and the winter wore away. When the ice started slipping out of the river, the Indians came paddling down from the North with their yearly supplies of furs. One bright morning, picture Paul gazing at two stalwart figures, gay with feathers and buckskins, swinging easily down the road.

With bated breath he hides behind a tree and watches his two heroes glide by on their moccasined feet. When he is certain that

they have gone, runs home as fast as his legs can carry him, to tell his mother that he has seen two red Indians, and that when he grows up he is going to be an artist and paint the Redmen. "Not at all, Paul," she said, "you are going to be a good farmer and settle down and behave yourself," but Paul never forgot his determination to become an artist, and he saw many more Indians. After his work at the District Grammar School was over for the day, one could see the small figure setting off for a run through the woods or going on a fishing excursion with the Indians and half-breeds.

His imagination was fired with what he saw of their wild life. He dreamed of a glorious adventure into the real Indian country, that measureless region of the West, the home of the buffalo, a land of lakes and rivers, of immense plains and towering snow-capped mountains, a land inhabited by men of another race, tribe upon tribe of them, untamed, self-reliant, wise in the ways of nature, and intensely interesting.

As Paul Kane grew into early manhood, school days ended. He was put to work in a furniture shop where he found some outlet for his artistic feeling by ornamenting the more elaborate pieces. And what he really wanted was the money to go abroad to study Art.

By the time he was 26 he had managed to scrape enough together to take him to the States, and after many wanderings, finally, by using his pencil and brush painting old portraits and making sketches, he saved enough to pay his way to Europe and to keep him there for some time.

Can you picture his joy in sailing in June 1841 from New Orleans for Marseilles. We can see him in the sophisticated studios of

2nd lect.

-3-

Paris, the retiring country lad working so diligently for the training for which he had striven so hard.

How they laughed at him. "So you are going back to Canada to paint the Indians; well, don't lose your scalp in the effort." He plodded on, and we can imagine how the young Canadian artist whose life hitherto had been spent in towns and villages where Art was almost unknown, where even educated men and women were too preoccupied with other matters to give much serious thought to anything so impractical, must have revelled in the great galleries of France and Italy.

From his European tour Kane brought back a number of copies of old masters, a broader and more highly developed vision, and above all a more secure grasp of the technique of his Art.

He was then determined^{as} he says, "To devote whatever talents and proficiency I possess to the painting of a series of pictures illustrative of the North American Indians, and scenery of an almost unknown country. These paintings, however, would necessarily require explanation and notes, and I accordingly kept a diary of my journeys."

With the same fine courage that carried him to Europe, he now set forth to spend the better part of three years travelling through the vast region that we now know as Western Canada, equipped with a portfolio and a box of paints, with a gun and a stock of ammunition.

In his own book "Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America", we read the astounding account of his adventures and

2nd lect.

-4-

from the reprint of 1925, I quote freely in what follows:

During the first year's journey (1845) he spent most of his time on the shores of Lakes Huron and Michigan, sketching and making portraits of the Chiefs, and he returned to Toronto in December.

In the ensuing March he had an interview with Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson Bay Company, who entered cordially into Kane's plans and gave him an order for a passage in the spring brigade of canoes. He was also commissioned to paint a series of twelve paintings of specified subjects from Indian life and "any piece of savage life you may consider to be most attractive and interesting."

Unfortunately, these paintings, like most of his early works, seem to have dropped out of sight, though in one record we read that 'twelve of Kane's pictures were in Buckingham Palace in 1858, for inspection by the Royal Family'.

The second expedition, this time to the Pacific Coast, was made possible by the generosity of Mr. George William Allan of Toronto, to whom Kane dedicated the record of his journeys. Mr. Allan also commissioned one hundred oil paintings of Indian life, and asked him to make a collection for him of head-dresses, clothing, pipes, etc.

On this trip Kane realized his dream; he saw Indian life in all its forms: its gaiety and tragic savagery. In his Journal he gives a detailed account of his amazing experiences; he slept in stifling tepees and fared on the fish and game of the hunt; he saw great herds of buffalo stampeding across the plains, slaughtered by the hundreds,

just for the fun of it; he paddled against heavy seas until every muscle cried out; on one occasion his party was cut off and nearly perished of starvation. In spite of all these vicissitudes he returned with nearly four hundred sketches and settled down in Toronto to finish his paintings based upon his field work, and to complete his manuscript.

In 1858 Kane revisited London, in order to publish his book and to make arrangements for the reproduction of such of his paintings as were used to illustrate it. Later he hoped to work upon a much more extensive series of illustrations, but unfortunately his eyesight began to fail and before long he was compelled to abandon entirely work with either brush or pencil. He died in Toronto, February 20th, 1871, at the age of 61.

The value of Paul Kane's paintings lies chiefly in the historical record that they give us. He depicts the incidents and details of the Indian life faithfully. Having been trained abroad he naturally adopted the European art tradition of his time. Consequently we see in his pictures of the North-West, not the brilliant sunlight of the high prairie country and the foothills, nor the pure intense colour of the North: we see instead the dull brown tone of the studio and gallery picture of the Middle Europe of his day. The topic may be North American, but the atmosphere, both physical and mental, which bathes the scene, is essentially European. His Indians, though authentic and convincing in detail, are conventional in their actions and gestures and in this respect resemble the poses of the models and the antique classical statues of the academic studios in which he had learned his craft. As long

ago as 1877, Nicholas Flood Davin, in his "Irishmen in Canada", remarks the same characteristics. He says:- "Kane did not give himself wholly up to nature. The Indian horses are Greek horses; the hills have much the colour and form of those of Ruysdael and the early European landscape painters. All this is particularly true of his later work, when, instead of going to nature he remained in his studio and painted and repainted his early sketches." For this reason, those sketches hurriedly drawn or painted, under conditions that must have been exceedingly trying, are truer interpretations of wild Western life than the finished studio paintings.

The critics have been justified in their criticism of Paul Kane, when they accuse him of working in the European tradition of realistic painting, but behind all the mannerisms of his adopted technique there is a great spirit that shines through.

I shall never forget the first time I saw his "Buffalo Hunt". The huge, solid, dark mass of the charging buffalo holds the centre of the canvas, and the sweep of the diagonal line running from the tail of the animal to the top of his powerful head, carries you with it; this same direction is emphasized by the spears of two mounted Indians who follow in hot pursuit. Their horses may be Greek horses, if you like, but they express for the artist, in their delicately tapered features, the symbol of the skill and dexterity of the swiftly moving Redman, in contrast to the clumsy awkwardness of the ponderous buffalo. The light falls brilliantly on the figures of the man and the flying manes and tails of the horses. For a moment they flash in dramatic contrast to the long levels of the prairie which stretch unendingly into the gray distance.

Another painting of Kane's I have always admired is one of an Indian village on the shore of Lake Huron. Groups of golden-green tepees form a solid mass at one end of the lake and are occasionally broken by the odd spot of brilliant red decoration. Stretching out to the left are the quiet levels of the water, held in a yellow-green mist and interspersed, as far as your eye can see, with wooded islands topped with pointed spruce, that seem to repeat in rhythm the triangular shape of the wigwams. The evening sky settles in long bands of horizontal gray, and one can almost hear the weird cry of the loon echoing in the stillness.

And yet again we are shown a dusty pink canoe being paddled across a silver stream around another plumed island of fan-shaped trees of a peculiar yellow-green colour, and the opposite shore fades in tones of pinkish brown.

Rather gentle and subdued in his approach, Kane fulfilled his boyish dream and translated in terms of quiet and dignified beauty this Canada of ours, and makes the record good of those early days, which otherwise would have disappeared, with the Redman, into the "Happy Hunting Ground of the West".

At this same time next Friday Cornelius Krieghoff, another figure of outstanding worth in Canadian Art, will be the topic.